A Scent of Sandalwood and Roses

It’s early morning. A light mist is draped over the city, giving it a surrealistic Salvador Dali look. Govinda dasi peers out the van window, her eyes searching the clumps of concrete buildings for signs of life. Only a few scraggly trees struggle here and there, embedded in the sidewalks of this concrete jungle. Lower East Side Manhattan, only blocks from The Bowery, is hardly a welcoming place.

“Ugly, really ugly,” she grimaces, looking at the dingy, faceless buildings wearing drab signboards. She is accustomed to trees, flowers, shrubs, and yards – even San Francisco had these. Having grown up in Southeast Texas where gardens, trees, and flowers surround most homes, she wonders why anyone would want to live here. It resembles a concrete hell.

But the Swami is here. She brightens at the thought, and excitement stirs in her mind as they near the Second Avenue address. The van stops in front, and Govinda dasi looks up at the sign – MATCHLESS GIFTS. “How appropriate!” she thinks. The tired couple unload their suitcases and bid their drivers goodbye.

They open the door to the small storefront temple, and Govinda dasi stares in wonder at the scene that meets her eyes. She feels she has stepped from New York hell into some exotic heaven. It is nothing like San Francisco. Billows of incense rise to the ceiling, blurring her vision of Swamiji sitting on a high seat at the far end of the room. Voices rise in chorus as the Swami leads the chanting. The music is divine. Swamiji’s voice rises above the others, singing the morning prayers sweetened with love and devotion. The beautiful melody engulfs them.

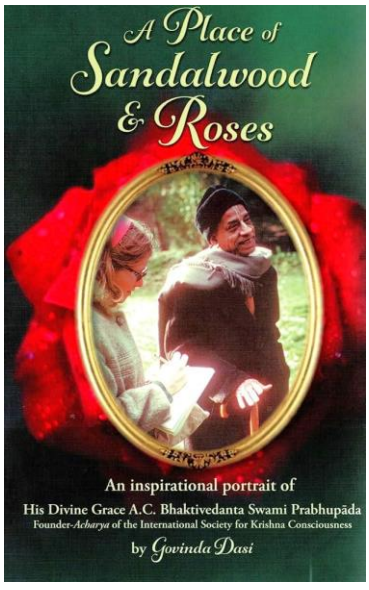
The Swami nods and beckons the couple to come forward. Both fall onto the floor in obeisance, offering prayers to their beloved guru. Swamiji smiles to acknowledge them, nods in subtle side-to-side Indian style, and continues singing.

After class, the Swami motions for Goursundar and Govinda dasi to come upstairs. He tells his New York disciples, “These are my students, Goursundar dasa and Govinda dasi, husband and wife. They are both good artists. They met me in San Francisco, and now they have come to study with me here.”

The couple follow the Swami, leaving their baggage in the storefront. He leads them through a small courtyard that has a few struggling ivy vines and a small birdhouse on a pole but no birds. Again Govinda wonders why anyone lives in a place like New York – concrete everywhere and only a few sickly trees. “No doubt about it. The Lower East Side is a barren concrete jungle, a veritable hell,” she thinks. “But now it’s our private heaven because Swamiji is here!” She smiles at this idea.

As they climb the narrow stairs of a building behind the storefront, she notices the musty smell of the stairwell. Yet when Swamiji opens the door of his tiny one-bedroom apartment, a burst of lovely fragrance escapes into the hall. The smell of roses, sandalwood, and incense mixed with some mysterious delicious scents mingle to form a light sweetness that floats from the room. Govinda dasi feels the Swami’s palpable spiritual presence that pervades the place. She takes a deep breath, inhaling the scent of his divine presence – a scent of sandalwood and roses.

(excerpt from A Place of Sandalwood & Roses by Govinda Dasi)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Sandalwood
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An inspirational portrait of
His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda
Founder-Ācārya of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness
by Govinda Dasi